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ABSTRACT

Educators recognize that the disadvantaged child of urban centers presents unique problems to the schools and that, for the most part, few effective programs have been provided for him. However, there are several things that can be done to benefit the urban child. (1) The teacher must want to teach the urban child and be willing to discard preconceived notions held about him. (2) Effective programs must begin early in order to intervene with the language growth of these children. (3) Appropriate realistic materials must be provided if the child is to relate to what he reads. Also important is the selection of appropriate standardized tests, coupled with the appropriate use of test results. (4) The teacher must understand the strengths and weaknesses of students, recognizing that their language is often more different than deficient. (5) The teacher must be concerned that the demands he puts on his students are realistic. (6) Preparation of teachers who will teach the urban child must give more emphasis to psychology, sociology, and practical experience. Hopefully, if these suggestions are adopted, there will be a reduction in the number of urban children in the schools who are educationally disadvantaged. References are included. (VJ)

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READING AND THE URBAN CHILD

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The Unsolved Dilemma

Introduction

For how long a period have educators identified their major problem that of the improvement of the verbal skills of the urban disadvantaged child? How often have we stated that our primary concern must be to improve the reading ability of the majority of youth in urban centers. This writer, and perhaps you do too, recalls when in the literature there was no mention of this concern for society. Then, as if suddenly from no where appeared the identification of a discovered major problem in education. Has the concern for the inabilities of the disadvantaged child to read been a newly discovered phenomenon? Have we not had the rural-poor, the Indian, the poor black, the Applachian children as well as the urban disadvantaged child? We're certain this dilemma has always been with us. Only more recently have we been objective and realized our responsibilities as educators to these children. Sad as it may seem, the problem is so complex that reading teachers will need to be most creative in attacking and resolving the problem as it exists. The situation is so critical for reading teachers that they must realize that this may be their final opportunity for preparing a successful program in teaching the urban child to read effectively.

Who is the Urban Disadvantaged Child?

The urban disadvantaged child can best be defined as the many thousands of youngsters who just do not fit the pattern for learning established for the normal child. They are those many children of minority groups for whom the textbook, the teacher and the school have little consideration or relationship.

They may be of many colors, and they have different cultural backgrounds. Havighurst[1] describes the disadvantaged as being "discriminated against socially and economically, widely distributed geographically and making up about 15% of our population." There is little doubt that there is a predominance of the disadvantaged in our urban centers where it is now predicted that by 1975 two of every three children may be classified as disadvantaged.

For How Long Has The Urban Disadvantaged Child Been With Us?

The disadvantaged child has always been with us in our urban centers. We are constantly reminded by some fortunate individuals that they have been able to overcome a humble background and not been overcome by the limitations of poverty. The effects of poverty are certainly more pronounced now. The relationship of poverty to lack of academic success is very great. In fact, poverty begets poverty. In our technological society who is seeking the undereducated individual? These folks are economically and socially trapped.

Some Dangers In Dealing With The Urban Disadvantaged

There is often times a tendency to over-react with the disadvantaged child. Since we know what we read in the paper and the media has reported the extreme, most teachers tend to possess a preconceived negative mental set for these children. We tend to lose a neutral perspective. Perhaps this is so because most teachers possess a middle-class background where a positive feeling toward education exists. When motivation other than this is present teachers tend to misinterpret the significance.

Not always will the language-usage of the urban disadvantaged child match that of the middle-class expectations. These children have a language. They know a language, and they use this language. Their language differs. Figure1[2] notes that the language growth is less for the disadvantaged child.

At grade two these children have a one-third deficiency in normal language growth and by grade six this deficiency has grown to one-half that of the normal child. We as teachers can little hope to remake these children. We need to tailor our expectations to meet their capabilities.

An additional trap for the educator is that of stereotyping the child. We may construct some generalizations - that is all. They are not all dumb; nor all dirty; nor all without goals and aspirations; nor all violent.

Some Of The Uniquenesses Of The Urban Disadvantaged Child

Havighurst[3] further classified the disadvantaged child into four distinct catagories of deprivation:

1. Affectional deprivation - lack of love fosters emotional instability.
2. Model person deprivation- absence of a real model or someone to whom they can look up to - someone who is successful.
3. Intellectual deprivation- lack of books, newspapers, and other intellectually stimulating materials.
4. Nutritional deprivation - lack of proper foods, diet.

Frank Reissman[4] describes the disadvantaged as having some general characteristics. The disadvantaged child is physical and visual and not aural. Two, he is content centered and not form centered. Three, he is extrinsically oriented and not introspective. And four, he is usually problem centered and not abstract centered.

The Background Of The Urban Disadvantaged Child

An assumption that is often amusing to the onlooker is that the urban disadvantaged child possesses no background of experiences. Teachers fail to understand that this child has lived and experienced a variety of happenings as his middle-class counterpart. The significance is that the former's

experiences are not the wholesome intellectual experiences conducive to the development of better reading skills. Their general health often indicates some similar pattern such as poor diet, very poor dentition, and an unusual number of illnesses. Their homes are usually not the most intellectually stimulating, display over-crowded conditions, often without the father, play areas are the streets and the hallways, and there is less opportunity to develop the proper growth in language.

Contrast this with the child of the middle-class home. He has an adequate diet, he visits with the dentist and orthodontist, he has a savings account at the bank, he has a library card and periodically visits with the librarian, he might have flown in a jet, and he visits shopping centers often with both his parents. All of these experiences have made a significant contribution to his language growth.

Language Growth of the Urban Disadvantaged Child

The youngsters termed disadvantaged are not without a language. On the contrary, their language is present, but it differs from that necessary to create good students. It is markedly different from that of the basal reading texts. It is understandable that their language would differ. Until about 18 months, their language growth is much alike and parallel. About this time the effects of their environmental differences begin to become evident. The middle-class child investigates, explores, labels, talks, experiences and is reinforced by the parents. The disadvantaged exists in a noisy environment, made to keep quiet, offered few stimulating experiences and given very few signs of encouragements.

From this period of development (18 months) differences in their language growth is readily apparent. One study, in an attempt to illustrate the barrenness as the language stimulation pointed out that most language experiences

were those that required little thinking - simply an agreement or compliance by show of assent. It further stated that disadvantaged children receive approximately 90 seconds of language experiences prior to departing for school each day.[5]

The Environment Of The Urban Disadvantaged

These children do come from an environment. Not always is it conducive to the language development of the successful student. They build their language growth on their experiences.

Their reader very often depicts the all-white middle-class family. The children are with high values and are therefore well cared for. Their homes are well arranged and efficiently organized. Both parents reside with the children. Father has an attache case, and there are many happy home situations. The house and particularly the kitchen is hospital clean.

They never see their world in their reader. They don't read of the fatherless home and mother off to work as a day worker before they arise. The reader does not include letting yourself back in the apartment in the afternoon. The pawnbroker and the loan shark are usually excluded. The junked automobile as a playground is not included. The winos of the neighborhood and the drabness of the tenement house are rarely ever presented. Their environment is completely foreign to the experiences they read of in their reader. One can say that in the typical reader they are asked to read of a world they have never perceived and probably never will perceive.

The Schools And The Curriculum Of The Urban Disadvantaged

Too often the schools of the urban center have long since outlived their usefulness. This is not unique to any particular geographic region of the country. It is nearly a universal trend that the urban schools lack much as modern centers

for learning today. Often the urban schools are overcrowded. Since their problems in reading are critical, it would seem that we could recognize the need to supply sufficient staff to effectively deal with the learning problems. Too, the teacher of the urban region should have received some unique preparation to prepare her to cope with the problems of these children. Many times the beginner, inexperienced and unprepared, finds herself teaching in this situation. Sometimes the personalities fail to coincide. When the teacher from the middle-class meets these children, she may fail to understand fully their frustrations. Teacher turn-over here is often frequent because the teaching assignment is not the most attractive and the work is not only most difficult but is frequently unrecognized. Teachers know it is easier to teach in the schools of the middle-class. Here children can motivate to learn and are preparing for college entrance when they are in the primary grades.

Some Suggestions For Reading Teachers Of Urban Disadvantaged

There are certainly many things which the writer could recommend to the teacher of reading for the children who are urban disadvantaged.

(1) Have the desire to want to teach the urban child. Then be genuine about that desire and forget about the missionary zeal. This is not sincere, and these youngsters are masters of human psychology and are cunning in their ways. They have had to be perceptive in order to survive in the tenements and apartments.

(2) Discard any notions that these children are all alike or that they are all stupid. These children measure poorly when we use tests with a different set of experiences. The belief that all is hopeless and that nothing can be done for them is true only if we consider "more of the same" approach. We must tax our imagination and use something more effective.

(3) We should begin a program that is meaningful and effective early. This is intervention with the normal language growth of these children. Brofenbenner[6] of Cornell (Headstart) states, "The child's psychological development to the extent that it is susceptible to environmental influence is determined almost entirely by the age of six." Can the eight week Headstart program consisting of modeling, coloring, field trips, stories, etc. really close the gaps that have been six years in developing? What the writer wishes to state is that by kindergarten or even nursery school it may be too late. And of course, we need to consider the importance of parent involvement here. Little can be accomplished if we fail to understand that the reinforcement from the home is critical.

(4) The use of appropriate materials is essential. The basal must contain stories that are easy for the urban child to identify. We recommend stories with which he can relate. These readers cannot simply leave the white man with a brown complexion which is so often the case.

A realistic consideration of the effect of the cumulative deficit must be given. The child is four months behind in the first grade by the sixth grade he is one and one half years behind. The longer he remains in school the further behind he is. When we recognize this we should be able to see the futility in keeping the appropriate graded reading text for one grade level in a room. This presents a problem when the parents of the urban child insist that nothing must be inferior for them.

The language experience stories work very well for the urban disadvantaged. In our Reading Center, John, a severly retarded reader who knew but four characters of the alphabet, was able to get to the third grade level very quickly when we used a language-experience approach.

There are some other readers specifically designed for the urban child.

To mind come The Detroit Readers by Gertrude Whipple and The Bank Street Readers of Macmillan.

(5) Let's use the tests appropriately. First have a purpose for the formal achievement measure and then see that the results are used in a manner to help the youngster as well as the teacher. Let's check the preparation of the test and the composition of the norm group. Too often, we have found ourselves using the wrong measuring stick.

(6) Then work on the elimination of any preconceived notions we may have about the urban child. In Pygmalion in the Classroom by Rosenthal, it was cited how much we are affected by remarks of others and still how the performance of the children is affected by the teachers' feelings.

The removal from our language all negative remarks such as - "It does not matter for them," "They can never go anywhere." "They will never amount to anything." "Nothing I do will really matter."

A friend suggests that we teach these children as though they may be the child of Dr. Brown, or Attorney Jones, or Professor Smith.

Let us utilize our parents more. This writer knows of no source where there can be more interest generated for the child. Create a partnership with their home and then outline a few fundamental contributions the home can make.

(7) Know your students and understand their strengths and their limitations. Realize that often they may not possess a deficit but really a difference - the language dialect, the experiences of the street and goals that are not distant but rather immediate. Stress the importance of building concepts and backgrounds of information. With vocabulary proceed carefully and use the concrete and not the abstract. For understanding be sure to provide the opportunity for discussion and clarity in language preciseness.

Provide many opportunities for the child to use language in speaking as well as listening.

Retain the knowledge that this child is in need of developing a positive self-concept. He can go no lower in esteem and inner-feelings. He is too certain that he is inferior. He possesses a certain defensiveness and it is not that he won't do something for you but rather that he can't do what you ask of him.

(8) It is important that we are realistic in our demands of these youngsters. We always know so much in reading that it often surprises me to note how often we continue to practice what we know to be a poor procedure. For instance, be sure we do not have these children performing at their frustration level. Let's have them at their appropriate reading level. Let's forget about the same homework expectations of every child. Too often the children are unable to do the work; the parent is unable to help them with it and further, they have no place to do school work in the home. The demand only compounds their problems. For free reading assignments let's provide ample time for the children to do them in school. Let's have some structure for them, not rigidity, so that they can get the optional benefit from the learning situation.

(9) Let's analyze our own preparation for teaching effectively the child of the urban center. This should include some psychology of learning courses as well as sociology and some practical experiences with the children.

In conclusion, it might be said that finally educators have recognized that the child of the urban center presents unique problems to our schools. We as educators have really, for the most part, failed to provide an effective program for these children. Perhaps if we had been successful earlier we would be able to see a reduction in the numbers of urban disadvantaged who we have in our schools today. Second, the urban disadvantaged have few deficits;

they possess many differences. They have weaknesses, but they also possess strengths. And last, the urban disadvantaged children need a meaningful program for reading now. This poses a real challenge to educators, but the writer is certain that as reading teachers today we are able to meet that challenge.

[1]Havighurst, Robert. "The Nature An Needs of the Disadvantaged," The Educationally Retarded and Disadvantaged. 66th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part I, Chicago, 1967.

[2]Figurel, J. Allen. "Limitations in the Vocabulary of Disadvantaged Children: A Cause of Poor Reading," Improvement of Reading Through Classroom Practice, 1964.

[3]Havighurst, Robert. International Reading Association, Proceedings, Vol. 9, pg.164. 1964.

[4]Reissman, Frank. The Culturally Deprived Child. New York: Harper and Row. pg. 68. 1962.

[5]Cheyney, Arnold B. Teaching Culturally Disadvantaged in the Elementary School. Columbus: Charles E. Merrill. pg. 61. 1967.

[6]Brofenbenner, Urie. "The Split-Level American Family," Saturday Review. October 7, 1967. pp. 60-66.